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ABSTRACT

The study examined the attitudes Mexican American parents had about the best and worst ways for school personnel to communicate with them about typical school situations. Bilingual interviewers questioned 130 Mexican American parents in the East Los Angeles area to gather data relating to 3 sets of variables which were then correlated and analyzed: (1) 4 typical school messages--an announcement of a school activity, and messages concerning the child's progress in school, discipline of the child, and praise of the child; (2) 4 categories of communication factors--channels, codes or languages, receivers, and sources; and (3) demographic characteristics--school's population density, age, sex, language used in the home, occupation, birth place and ecological background (rural or urban origins), parents' birth place and ecological background, length of residence in Los Angeles, formal education, marital status, number of children and adults in the home, church affiliation, and age at marriage. Findings included: choice of channel for transmitting messages depended primarily on the message; choice of which language to use depended more on the demographic variables; little or no opposition was recorded against using a bilingual message; messages should normally be sent to both parents unless special circumstances (one parent families) indicated otherwise; a school conference, report card, or personal letter were felt to be the best channel; teachers were considered the best source of communication. (NQ)

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A STUDY OF COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES OF MEXICAN AMERICAN PARENTS

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In any communication situation, the person sending the message has a number of communication choices to make. He must choose the content of the message, the language or code to be used, the channel or media by which to send it, and so forth. Sometimes these choices are obvious, or we tend to believe they are, but the wrong choice of any communication factor may contribute to a rejection of the message.

The purpose of this study, then, was to discover what attitudes Mexican American parents have about the best and worst ways for school personnel to communicate with them about typical school situations. The practical application of these data is to provide guidelines for administrators, teachers, and staff to use when they must make choices concerning how to communicate with the parents of Mexican American children. Knowing what parents consider the best and worst ways to communicate in certain situations may help the school person to make more effective communication selections.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

This study used bilingual interviewers to question 130 Mexican American parents randomly chosen from lists of pupils from selected elementary schools in the East Los Angeles area. The interviewers gathered data relating to three sets of variables which were then correlated and analyzed.

The first set of variables consisted of four typical school messages: (1) a message concerning the child's progress in school, (2) an announcement of a school activity, (3) a message concerning discipline of the child, and (4) a message concerning praise of the child. Each of the message situations was described to the parents who were then asked to indicate how they preferred to receive communication about each of them.

The second set of variables was four categories of communication factors: (1) channels, (2) codes or languages, (3) receivers, and (4) sources. These four categories were broken down into the items shown in the percentage tables on the following pages. As each of the four messages were described, parents were asked to select the best and worst channel, code, receiver, and source for that message.

The third set of variables were the demographic characteristics of the Mexican American parents. In addition to an analysis of the communication preferences of the entire sample of 130 parents, analyses of the following sixteen population characteristics were made: population density (see next paragraph for explanation), sex, age, language used in the home, occupation, birth place, parents' birth place, ecological background (rural or urban origins), parents' ecological background, length of residence in Los Angeles, formal education, marital status, number of children in the home, number of adults in the home, church affiliation, and age at marriage.

Two population density groups were sampled. One group, called the high density sample, consisted of parents of pupils from schools which were mostly populated with persons with Spanish surnames. Some of the high density schools had as high as 98 per cent Spanish surname enrollment. The other group, the low density sample, was composed of parents whose children attended schools of about 75 per cent Spanish surname enrollment.

The findings given here are only the highlights of the correlations made among these three sets of variables. The total study, from which this information is abstracted, is more than 280 pages in length. In this paper, general observations about the study which relate to communication with Mexican American parents will first be presented. This will be followed by a discussion of each of the four messages studied. The communication preferences of the total 130 parents sampled for each message will be given in tabular form. Comments and guidelines for the individual message will follow each table.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

Suggestions for using the Findings

1. One of the clearest findings of the study is that Mexican American parents vary greatly in their communication preferences. It is apparent that this population is not a monolithic culture, as is sometimes thought, but instead is composed of peoples from many different historical backgrounds, immigration patterns, political points of view, socio-economic characteristics and so on. Given such a pluralistic culture, the implications for communication are clear. The communicator must be ever vigilant to treat each parent as a separate entity and avoid the temptation to generalize about Mexican Americans as a unified group. The communicator should remember that he is making communication choices for individuals and not for a mass of people who all have the same characteristics. Thus the findings of this study should be thought of only as guidelines and careful attention should be paid to the specific situation with which the communicator is dealing.

2. These data are not meant to be a substitute for the most important key to effective communication. That key is, of course, knowing as much as possible about the history, language, value systems, and living conditions of Mexican Americans. The data presented here should be thought of as an adjunct to this more basic information.

3. There are many other aspects of communication which were not considered in this study that also influence the effectiveness of a message. The communicator needs to also make choices concerning such things as wording the message and non-verbal components (tone of voice, visual symbols, type of paper used, etc.). Also the four messages studied will not, of course, be adequate to cover all the message situations which face the school person in communicating with Mexican American parents.

4. The communicator should keep in mind that conditions are constantly changing and what might be ineffective communication today, may be effective tomorrow. For example, home conferences generally received very low preferences for the four messages included in this study. However, if parents are exposed to this kind of communication channel they might become very favorable toward it for these or other kinds of messages. It is strongly felt that there is great need for intelligent experimentation in communication. New channels, codes, receivers, sources, etc. should be tried for various kinds of messages. The worst thing that could happen to the guidelines of this study is that they be treated as dogma rather than as suggestions.

5. School personnel should be strongly cautioned against an attitude that Mexican American parents don't care about the education of their children. One of the most encouraging sidelights of this study and one which has communication implications, is the high degree of interest that those Mexican American parents interviewed had in the education of their children. The interviewers reported great concern on the part of the parents and a desire to talk about the schools. It is incumbent upon school personnel to utilize this interest in their communication attempts with Mexican American parents. Interest in their children's education may be an important key, if used effectively, for improved communication with Mexican American parents.

General Guidelines that Apply to all Messages Studied

Channels. The choice of a channel of communication for transmitting messages depends primarily on the message to be sent and secondly on the demographic characteristics of the parents. Parents indicated different channel preferences for all four of the messages studied in this research. These preferences are discussed individually in the sections relating to each message.

Codes. The choice of which language or code to use depends more upon the demographic variables of the individuals studied than it does upon the message. Code preferences selected by the parents were almost the same for all four messages.

a. Although English alone was preferred by the largest percentage of parents, an almost equally as large percentage was recorded in favor of using both Spanish and English, where possible. Tables 1 through 4 show similar percentages of preference for all four messages. These tables also show some opposition to both English and Spanish if they are used alone. It will also be noted that little or no opposition was recorded against using a bilingual message. It is, therefore, recommended that bilingual messages be used whenever possible when large numbers of parents are to be contacted.
b. The high density sample favored using Spanish alone more than did the low density group. The low density sample favored bilingual messages over English used alone.
c. A perfect progression was found in age group preferences. The younger the parent, the more likely he was to prefer English and identify

Spanish as the worst code for communicating. Conversely, the older the parent, the more likely he was to favor Spanish and dislike English. It should be kept in mind, however, that many attitudes are changing in this area. Many younger Mexican Americans, especially, are developing a revived pride in their culture and consequently the Spanish language. It may be, therefore, that in the very near future, Spanish will become an even more important communication code than was indicated by these data.

d. Birth place, parents' birth place, length of residence in Los Angeles, formal education, and number of children in the family were all found to be indices of language preference. Those born in Mexico, as would be expected, tended to favor Spanish by high percentages. Those born in the United States tended to favor English. If both parents of the respondent were born in Mexico or the United States, these trends were intensified. The longer a parent lived in Los Angeles, the more likely he preferred English. The more formal education, the more preference for English and the more children in the family, the more likely Spanish is preferred.

Receivers. The selection of who should receive a message in the family was the most stable characteristic of communication studied. Little variation of preferences was found which could be traced to either message or demographic variables.

a. It has been suggested that messages should be directed to the father of a Mexican American family. This study did not support that concept for any of the four messages studied. It was found that messages should normally be sent to both parents unless special circumstances (one parent families, etc.) would indicate otherwise.
b. There was some shift in receiver preferences when sex roles were analyzed. Males tended to favor the father a little more as a receiver and females tended to favor the mother a little more. Both males and females, however, overwhelmingly favored both parents as the most preferred receiver.
c. Parents who spoke primarily Spanish favored both parents as a receiver more than bilinguals or those who spoke primarily English.

Sources. Selection of a source of communication depends primarily on the message but it is also related to the demographic characteristics of the parents.

a. The teacher was overwhelmingly the preferred source for all four messages considered in this study. It is recommended that teachers be encouraged to initiate more messages to Mexican American parents.
b. The principal was generally the next favored source of communication but the principal also usually received the largest number of worst preferences. There seems to be more controversy surrounding the principal as a communicator source than any other school person.
c. The role of the vice principal as a communication source is either not understood or is ignored. The vice principal received recognition as either the best or worst source from only small percentages of parents.
d. The role of the teacher aide was either not known or rejected as a source of communication for the messages of this study. Few respondents selected the aide as the best communication source for any message. Some parents selected the aide as the worst source, however.

e. The school nurse was rejected as a communicator for the four messages included in this study. This is not to say, however, that the nurse might not be useful as a communicator for other messages.

TABLE 1. PREFERENCES FOR A MESSAGE CONCERNING PROGRESS IN SCHOOL

Best Channel		Worst Channel	
School Conference	45 %	No Preference	36 %
Report Card	24 %	Telephone	34 %
Personal Letter	15 %	Report Card	12 %
Home Conference	8 %	Personal Letter	8 %
Telephone	8 %	Home Conference	3 %
Other	0 %	School Conference	3 %
No Preference	0 %	Other	2 %
Best Code		**Worst Code**	
English Alone	38 %	No Preference	67 %
Both Languages	36 %	English Alone	20 %
Spanish Alone	25 %	Spanish Alone	10 %
No Preference	1 %	Other	3 %
Other	0 %	Both Languages	0 %
Best Receiver		**Worst Receiver**	
Both Parents	67 %	No Preference	79 %
Mother Only	27 %	Mother Only	7 %
Father Only	5 %	Father Only	5 %
Other	2 %	Other	5 %
No Preference	0 %	Both Parents	3 %
Best Source		**Worst Source**	
Teacher	79 %	No Preference	55 %
Principal (13 %) / Vice Principal (3 %)	16 %	Principal (25 %) / Vice Principal (4 %)	29 %
Other	2 %	School Nurse	12 %
No Preference	2 %	Teacher Aide	3 %
Teacher Aide	0 %	Other	1 %
School Nurse	0 %	Teacher	1 %

Comments and Guidelines for a Progress Message

Channels.

a. School conference was the favored channel and should be encouraged for the discussion of the child's progress in school.
b. The telephone should generally be avoided for this type of message. Males were especially opposed to the telephone for this message.
c. The following demographic categories especially favored the school conference more than their counterparts: high density groups, younger parents, English only and bilingual speakers, and families with smaller numbers of children.
d. Bilinguals and non-Catholics favored the home conference more than

did their counterparts but they still primarily favored the school conference as their first choice.

e. Families with large numbers of children were more interested in the report card than other groups but still favored the school conference as their most preferred channel of communication.

Codes.

a. Bilingual messages seemed to be the most effective code for usage in a progress message. If the conference method is used as a channel of communication, the services of a translator would be required for a non-Spanish speaking teacher. If a report card is used, it should be printed in both English and Spanish.

b. For more detail consult "Codes" section under "General Guidelines."

Receivers.

a. Both parents should ideally be addressed with a progress message.

b. For more detail consult "Receivers" section under "General Guidelines."

Sources.

a. The teacher was overwhelmingly the favorite source for a progress message.

b. The principal received the largest amount of opposition.

TABLE 2. PREFERENCES FOR AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF SCHOOL ACTIVITY

Best Channel		Worst Channel	
Printed Form	47 %	No Preference	54 %
Personal Letter	33 %	Telephone	25 %
Telephone	8 %	Home Conference	8 %
School Conference	8 %	School Conference	5 %
Other	0 %	Personal Letter	2 %
No Preference	0 %	Other	2 %
Best Code		**Worst Code**	
English Alone	38 %	No Preference	68 %
Both Languages	34 %	English Alone	18 %
Spanish Alone	26 %	Spanish Alone	11 %
No Preference	2 %	Other	2 %
Other	0 %	Both Languages	1 %
Best Receiver		**Worst Receiver**	
Both Parents	72 %	No Preference	82 %
Mother Only	24 %	Mother Only	7 %
Father Only	2 %	Other	5 %
Other	2 %	Father Only	3 %
No Preference	0 %	Both Parents	2 %
Best Source		**Worst Source**	
Teacher	48 %	No Preference	75 %
Principal (35 %)	37 %	School Nurse	10 %
Vice Principal (2 %)		Principal (6 %)	6 %
Other	9 %	Vice Principal (0 %)	
No Preference	5 %	Teacher Aide	2 %
Teacher Aide	1 %	Other	2 %
School Nurse	0 %	Teacher	2 %

Comments and Guidelines for an Activity Announcement

Channels.

a. The traditional method of sending announcements home by way of the child seemed to be generally accepted by the parents.
b. Written channels were favored for this type of message, especially the printed form and secondarily the personal letter. Written channels are recommended for this type message.
c. Very little interest was shown in oral channels. The highest opposition was registered against the telephone.
d. Some demographic groups, especially males, one-parent families, one-child families, families with large numbers of children and non-Catholics preferred the personal letter delivered by mail over the printed form delivered by the child.

Codes.

a. For more detail consult the "Codes" section under "General Guidelines."
b. Dual language messages are especially encouraged for this message.
c. Care should be taken in translation to get the "flavor" of the message. A message in English literally translated into Spanish may sound too harsh and business-like for the Spanish reader.
d. Be careful that one language is not given priority position on the page or in some other way reveal a position of primacy between the two codes.

Receivers.

a. For more detail consult "Receivers" section under "General Guidelines."
b. Both parents was the most preferred receiver and should be so used.

Sources.

a. The principal gained somewhat in preference for this message but the teacher was the most preferred source for communication.
b. The large percentage of "other" reactions for this message was analyzed. Most said the person in charge of the activity should send the message.
c. Some groups, notably the high density, older aged, and those from rural backgrounds gave the principal greater preference as a source of communication for an activity announcement.

TABLE 3. PREFERENCES FOR A MESSAGE CONCERNING DISCIPLINE OF THE CHILD

Best Channel		Worst Channel	
Telephone	35 %	No Preference	47 %
School Conference	32 %	Printed Form	24 %
Personal Letter	19 %	Telephone	22 %
Home Conference	12 %	Personal Letter	7 %
Printed Form	3 %	School Conference	0 %
Other	0 %	Home Conference	0 %
No Preference	0 %	Other	0 %

Best Code		Worst Code	
English Alone	39 %	No Preference	70 %
Both Languages	33 %	English Alone	16 %
Spanish Alone	27 %	Spanish Alone	12 %
No Preference	1 %	Other	2 %
Other	0 %	Both Languages	0 %

Best Receiver		Worst Receiver	
Both Parents	67 %	No Preference	82 %
Mother Only	27 %	Mother Only	7 %
Father Only	5 %	Father Only	5 %
Other	1 %	Other	5 %
No Preference	0 %	Both Parents	2 %

Best Source		Worst Source	
Teacher	65 %	No Preference	62 %
Principal (22 %) / Vice Principal (6 %)	28 %	Principal (15 %) / Vice Principal (0 %)	15 %
No Preference	4 %	School Nurse	14 %
Other	2 %	Teacher Aide	5 %
Teacher Aide	1 %	Other	4 %
School Nurse	0 %	Teacher	1 %

Comments and Guidelines for a Discipline Message

Channels.

a. The highest percentage of preference was the telephone with the school conference following closely.

b. There appeared to be great interest in direct, oral communication. The home conference received more preference for this message than for any other. If home conference is combined with school conference, about 44 % of the parents fall into this combination. Thus, face-to-face communication is recommended for this message.

c. There was considerable objection to the printed form and the telephone. No opposition was recorded against either conference method.

d. It is recommended that the conference be used for this type of message. The telephone is also a possibility for some situations.

e. Printed forms such as "behavior notices," "retention after school forms," and the like appear to have little popularity and should probably not be used except in cases where it is difficult to notify parents in any other way.

f. High density sample and also younger parents favored the school conference instead of the telephone.

g. Spanish speakers were considerably less interested in the conference and more interested in the telephone and the personal letter as a channel of communication about discipline. There may be some hesitency on the part of Spanish-only speakers to deal in a conference situation with Anglo administrators or teachers. Perhaps more effort needs to be made to obtain more bilingual school personnel and translators to overcome this hesitancy.

Codes.

a. For more detail consult "Codes" section under "General Guidelines."
b. Bilingual messages are again encouraged but inasmuch as discipline messages tend to be very individualistic, every effort should be made to adjust the language to the desires of the particular parent involved. This is especially vital if one adjusts to the preference for an oral channel for this message.

Receivers.

a. For more detail consult "Receivers" section under "General Guidelines."
b. Both parents should be consulted, if possible, for this message.

Sources.

a. The teacher, again, was the most preferred source and thought should be given to transferring some of the traditional discipline communication with parents from the administrator to the teacher.
b. Principals were given considerably higher preference as a source for a discipline message than they were in other messages. However, the principal still received opposition as a source.
c. The vice principal received his highest percentage of preference for this message, although this still amounted to only 6 per cent. The vice principal received no worst source designations. Males selected the vice principal more as a source for a discipline message than did females.
d. Some groups, notably those born in Mexico, those whose parents were born in Mexico, those from rural backgrounds, and those whose parents were from rural backgrounds, gave the principal higher percentages of preference than did their counterparts. The opposite groupings (the U.S. born, urban backgrounds, etc.) also tended to show more dislike of the principal in the worst source selections. There seems to be a definite trend on the part of parents that as they become more acculturated, they also tend to show less credibility in the principal as a source of communication for discipline messages.
e. Interestingly, the finding of steady deterioration of the principal's image or prestige was not completely sustained when length of residence in Los Angeles was analyzed. The groupings of this demographic factor showed a definite progression of dislike for the principal, (the longer a parent lived in Los Angeles, the more likely he was to dislike the principal) but groupings showed the opposite trend in selecting the principal as the best source for a discipline message. A decided progression was found that showed the longer one lived in Los Angeles, the more likely he was to favor the principal as a source for a discipline message.
f. The deterioration of the principal's image or prestige as a communication source for discipline messages may be partially explained because as the parents become more acculturated they have more contact with the principal in these unpleasant situations. There is, however, a decided credibility problem for such messages which the principal needs to recognize and, if possible, counteract.

TABLE 4. PREFERENCES FOR A MESSAGE CONCERNING PRAISE OF THE CHILD

Best Channel		Worst Channel	
Personal Letter	46 %	No Preference	56 %
School Conference	19 %	Telephone	24 %
Printed Form	14 %	Printed Form	14 %
Telephone	12 %	Personal Letter	3 %
Home Conference	6 %	Home Conference	2 %
No Preference	2 %	Other	1 %
Other	1 %	School Conference	0 %
Best Code		**Worst Code**	
English Alone	39 %	No Preference	69 %
Both Languages	33 %	English Alone	19 %
Spanish Alone	26 %	Spanish Alone	10 %
No Preference	2 %	Other	2 %
Other	0 %	Both Languages	0 %
Best Receiver		**Worst Receiver**	
Both Parents	73 %	No Preference	85 %
Mother Only	23 %	Mother Only	5 %
Father Only	2 %	Father Only	4 %
Other	2 %	Other	4 %
No Preference	0 %	Both Parents	2 %
Best Source		**Worst Source**	
Teacher	68 %	No Preference	59 %
Principal (27 %)		School Nurse	16 %
Vice Principal (2 %)	29 %	Principal (15 %)	
No Preference	2 %	Vice Principal (1 %)	16 %
Teacher Aide	1 %	Teacher Aide	5 %
School Nurse	0 %	Other	2 %
Other	0 %	Teacher	2 %

Comments and Guidelines for a Message of Praise

Unhappily, the interviewers for this study discovered no instances where parents indicated that they had ever received a message of praise of their children from the school. Obviously, schools have sent out messages of praise from time to time but there did not seem to be a widespread practice of this. It is strongly recommended that such messages be judiciously increased as a possible approach for improving communication with parents.

Channels.

a. A personal letter delivered by mail was the most preferred channel for a message of praise. Probably, the desire to retain such a message motivated the desire for written communication. It is recommended that this channel be used where practical. The school conference is also a possibility since little opposition was shown to it.

b. The most objection was registered against the telephone and the printed form.

Codes.

a. For more detail consult "Codes" section under "General Guidelines."
b. Bilingual messages are recommended unless the parent is known to the sender. Since this kind of message should be more individualized, the code should be adapted where possible to the particular parent. If the parent is not known personally, however, and a personal letter is used, it probably should be a bilingual message taking the precautions discussed in the discipline message concerning translation and priority of arrangement.

Receivers.

a. For more detail consult "Receivers" section under "General Guidelines."
b. Both parents received a higher percentage as a receiver for this message than for any other and is recommended as the receiver that should be used.

Sources.

a. Again, the teacher was the most preferred source. The principal also received some support.
b. Some groups, such as those with large numbers of children, those with large numbers of adults in the family, and non-Catholice preferred the principal more as a source for a message of praise than did other demographic groups.
c. It would appear that the source of a message of praise is not a critical matter. The important thing is that they be sent by someone. The message of praise may be a very effective way for the principal to improve his communication image problem as was discussed under the discipline message.